A PUBLIC FAITH
Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18
June 1, 1980

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"Beware of practicing your piety before men," Jesus said...With unmistaking clarity the New English Bible translates it..."Be careful not to make a show of your religion..."

In Graham Greene's superb novel, The Power and the Glory, an alcholic priest is itinerating from village to village in southern Mexico, saying Mass, hearing confessions and baptizing children. The money he will be paid for the baptisms will be substantial. But now he's sitting in a cantina, drinking too much brandy, calculating how many bottles he can purchase with his baptism money. Greene writes: "It was appalling how easily one forgot and went back...The brandy was musty on the tongue with his own corruption. God might forgive cowardice and passion, but was it possible to forgive the habit of piety?... He drank the brandy down like damnation: men like the half-caste could be saved: salvation could strike like lightning at the evil heart, but the habit of piety excluded everything but the evening prayer and the Guild meeting and the feel of humble lips on your gloved hand." (The Power and the Glory, p.227-228).

Greene is one of many literary figures who are fascinated by the idea of corrupt religion, dishonest piety. It is a popular subject because everyone of us, I believe, knows about it and has, frankly, participated in it. Reformed theology, with its interest in sin, combined with the insights of Freudian psychiatry, has revealed to us the complexity of the human psyches to us. We know, personally, that in matters religious, we act out of a variety of motives. We have experienced the theological subtlety that sin is fundamentally pride and pride is sin so thoroughly that we can feel proud about understanding it that clearly. We know, because we have witnessed it, that religious arrogance is somehow the most offensive human arrogance and that it can become dangerously powerful. We have felt the curious proximity between passionate conviction and intolerance. We know, that is to say, the tremendous potential for wrong and dishonesty in the practice of religion itself. We regard self-proclaimed public piety with a mixture of admiration and dread. We worry that television's "super Christians" know something we don't know and yet most of us at least entertain the healthy skepticism that the whole thing is a highly profitable put-on.

We are a very pious people. French political scientists have always sneered at the religious overtones in our public life. And the corruption of that piety is an obsession in American literature. Mark Twain's essays and humorous sketches are full of it. Twain mercilessly attacked public piety, made fun of religious customs, didn't like Henry Ward Beecher - the most prominent clergyman of the day - at all, and one time said that if heaven was like the church services he had attended - sour hymns, long-winded prayers, and irrelevant sermons - he was rather glad to be going to hell.

Fred Buechner

John Updike has written a series of novels about a fallen clergyman which explore the same terrain. But the most devastating of all was Sinclair Lewis in his remarkable novel, Elmer Gantry. Near the end of the book, Gantry has climbed all the way up the ecclesiastical ladder, is pastor of a wealthy, successful and growing congregation, a member of Rotary, the Country Club and had even taken golf lessons. After guest speaking one evening in a small town in Indiana, he is doing what he likes best - regaling his host, a modest Methodist preacher by the name of Pengilly, with story after story about the power and prestige and success of his own church...

"You see - oh, of course I give 'em the straight old-time gospel in my sermon - I'm not the least bit afraid of talking right up to 'em and reminding them of the awful consequences of sin and ignorance and spiritual sloth. Yes sir! No blinking the horrors of the

Updike
A Month of Sundays

old-time proven Hell, not in any church I'm running! But also we make 'em get together, and their pastor is just one of their chums, and we sing cheerful, comforting songs, and do they like it? Say! It shows up in the collections!

"'Mr. Gantry,' said Andrew Pengilly, 'why don't you believe in God?'" (Elmer Gantry, p.367).

All of that I would offer as contemporary commentary on the question raised by our text this morning; the question of public faith. How, after all, to express publicly what we feel privately? How to be an honest Christian in the world? Our culture tries to soften the question by suggesting that religious faith is a kind of amorphous attitude of patriotism, individualism and community spirit. The culture seems to favor "religion in general". George Santayana once observed that American culture favors religions in general but that "to try to be religious in general is like trying to speak language in general. It cannot be done. We speak one language or another and we are religious in this way of that way, not in general." (Harvey Cox, The Seduction of the Spirit, p.317).

Part of the dilemma of traditional Protestant churches is precisely here. We are not distinguishable from the rest of the population. We are not different. We look like everybody else. We don't talk, act or spend our money differently from the mainstream of the culture. Elton Trueblood predicts that the Roman Catholic Church will one day regret dropping the tradition of meatless Fridays. It was one way, at least, publicly to make a religious gesture. In any event, there is nothing about our public religiosity that sets us apart. Part of the reason is our suspicion of public religion. But part, also, is that we either don't know what to do, or we choose consciously not to demonstrate our religious conviction publicly. It is, I would contend, a lively and timely question.

It emerges dramatically in a major portion of the Sermon on the Mount. "Beware of practicing your piety before men," Jesus said, and then illustrated..."when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing...when you pray go into your room and shut the door...when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by men."

Jewish culture in the first century knew exactly what religious behavior was. It rested on three fundamental practices common to all the faithful: almsgiving, praying and fasting. None were to be done as ends in themselves: the rabbis were careful to warn against public ostentation in religion. Jewish scholars suggest that the rabbis of the day would have endorsed and applauded Jesus' words about public religion.

Almsgiving...a good Jew gave one tenth of his goods, earnings, crops to the Lord - his tithe. That's what he owed. Alms were money given in addition to the tithe. The rabbis taught that it was the most sacred duty of all and there are stringent warnings against demeaning and patronizing the beneficiaries of the alms. But sometimes a wealthy man came to Synagogue in caravan, en route to business engagements elsewhere, and sometimes his entourage was terribly conspicuous and sometimes when he dismounted from his camel and approached the Synagogue door with a bulging pouch in his hand you really couldn't help but conclude that alms were about to be given - significant alms - and that a lot of poor people would eat tonight and what a magnaninous gesture it was. And Jesus suggested that the giver was already receiving the reward he wanted; namely, the admiration and esteem of his fellow countrymen. Jesus never said there were no rewards for piety. He simply declared that God doesn't reward that kind.

Prayer...In Eastern religions prayer happens at specified times during the day. In the first century, devout Jews stopped what they were doing, faced Jerusalem and prayed at nine, noon and three p.m. And sometimes it happened that a man was in the Synagogue or on a busy street corner at the appointed time and had to say his prayer under the admiring stares of his less pious fellows. And sometimes the same man was caught on the same corner at nine a.m. so many times you had to conclude that it was not an accident; that at least part of what was going on here was a little self-indulgence; that he rather enjoyed his pious predicament - which is to say he was reaping the reward he wanted from the beginning.

I don't know about you but I'm sensitive about this one. I retain vivid memories of attending prayer meetings and realizing that the same people were praying out loud for the same things every week...and that to a young boy it felt very much like an extended oratorical contest. Much later I discovered the Boston newspaper observation about a very prominent prayer..."It was the most eloquent prayer ever offered to a Boston audience." And several weeks ago I was visiting Princeton Seminary at the same time a Conference of laypeople was using the facilities and at lunch my table mates, upon discovering that I was not one of them, announced, "We pray before eating", and joined hands and thanked God, rather loudly I thought, for the food and the fact that they had the gift of the Spirit - which by inference meant that I, obviously, did not. And among memories I retain are painfully long prayers in church which meant enforced silence and motionlessness and agony. Only later did I read William Barclay's observation about eighteenth century Church of Scotland worship..."The efficacy of prayer was measured by its ardor and its fluency and not least by its fervid lengthiness..." And his candid commentary..."There still is a kind of subconscious idea that if we batter long enough at God's door, He will answer: that God can be talked, and even pestered into condescension." (Daily Study Bible, Vol. I, p.195).

Jesus never said God would not reward praying. He simply warned that it ought to be private.

Fasting - all Jews were expected to fast on the Day of Atonement. The devout fasted frequently, sometimes twice a week, Monday and Thursday which happened also to be market days, which means that if you had a mind to you could telegraph the fact of your great faith to a great number of people. And in case the point was missed you could wear your shabbiest clothes and smear ashes on your cheeks to make you look pale which is how fasting people look anyway. A fascinating custom which began, I understand, very early in the human story as a device to attract the attention of the Deity and to receive His pity and therefore His kindness. From the beginning, that is to say, fasting has, at least in part, intended to call attention to itself. Jesus assumed people would do it. There are interesting and creative by-products - but clearly, if it is evident to others it is useless.

We don't know much about fasting. We may have to learn. Our children may have to learn more about it than we will ever know. The Scarsdale Diet doesn't qualify, although one of the very few pleasures inherent in dieting is the admiration of one's less disciplined friends. We don't fast religiously - but we do, on occasion - enjoy a little feeling of persecution, if not martyrdom. Someone observed that the favorite game of American churches is "What would we do without so and so?" "So and so" is the person who is asked to and agrees to do everything - chair the committees, sing in the choir, cook the lunches and lock up afterward. He or she, then, is entitled to play martyr - a favorite game for Christians in every age.

Public faith is susceptible to abuse. Public piety can masquerade phoniness. Religion can be grossly dishonest. Part of my concern is that we know that so thoroughly that we give a very low priority to any kind of religious practice. That is

unfortunate. Jesus was not opposed to the rituals of organized religion. In fact, He practiced them himself. We, however, have used His trenchant observation on public faith to rationalize total abandonment. We need, I believe, to reclaim the wisdom of the past. We are poorer, I believe, because we don't know about nor practice disciplined giving, regular praying and intentional self-sacrifice. In fact, I don't know of a single instance when Christian men and women have read the Bible together, prayed together, talked honestly to one another - that all did not agree that something very important had happened to them. I believe a disciplined piety will become more and more important in the life of the American Church.

But the point of the text, documented at so many places in the narrative is the Gospel: the Good News that we are saved, not by the good things we do - even the religious things, but by God's love in Jesus Christ: that religion and all its paraphernalia is the way we respond to the love of God. Jesus was really teaching a new approach to religion - based on two equally important emphases - personal piety, combined with an uncompromisingly public faith. That, I think, is the Christian genius. I would not argue with those who contend that He simply taught good Judaism at this point. Jesus never heard the word Christian, after all. We share a great deal with Jewish brothers and sisters - far more than we differ.

He taught that piety - alms, praying, fasting - are, by nature, productive, creative practices so long as they are private. When they become public, and here is the rub, they take the place of the kinds of things His people should be doing in public. That's the problem. Piety can be corrupt. But the real problem is that public piety can replace public faith. We're inclined to think that prayer in the public schools is a religious issue. It isn't. If I'm reading the New Testament right - you do your praying at home or at church, or in the back of your mind, in the closet, privately. The religious dimension in school matters has to do with equality and the quality of education and bond issues, and the human concerns. We're inclined to think that religious issues in public have to do with keeping "In God We Trust" on the coins and a majority of Christians in Congress. 200,000 Evangelicals descended on Washington recently to advocate these kinds of public concerns. But if I'm reading correctly, public faith has more to do, simply stated, with our Lord's agenda. He didn't disguise it. He cared about the poor people. He cared about justice. He cared about the world and the quality of life lived in it. He cared about the barriers - religious, racial, economic and political which people build between themselves. He was the Prince of Peace. Those are the only religious issues He recognized as public.

"Beware of practicing your piety before men," He said. But in the same breath He told His disciples: "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven."

I don't believe there is a Christian party line on the public issues which face us. But I am sure that a faith which fails to confront those issues is less than Christian. Jesus Christ called His disciples to follow Him and frankly, He paid very little attention to the particularities of their religious practice. He calls us to follow also. We will do that better, more intelligently, sensitively, creatively, if we practice our piety in a disciplined fashion. But what our Lord wants are Christian men and women who are unapologetically and uncompromisingly public in their convictions: men and women with the strength and courage and grace to be faithful in the world. And that - He promised - that dynamic combination of private piety and public faith will not only be rewarded by God, it might even change the world! Amen.

> Eternal God: on occasion we have played to the gallery and we regret it. Forgive us for it. In our heart of hearts we want to be applauded by no one but you. We know you love us and accept us. Now give us the courage to love and serve you publicly. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.